



2015-17 budget request puts State Parks on path toward a healthy system

The Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission submitted a 2015-17 operating budget request of \$153 million. The request is geared toward shoring up one of the largest and most beautiful park systems in the country – a park system that has suffered significant losses in capacity due to budget reductions in the past few years.

The request is reasonable. Multiple economic studies have shown that visits to state parks generate more revenue for the state General Fund than State Parks is requesting for operations. The proposed budget allows reinvestment in parks and services that directly benefit the public and help to sustain a strong economic foundation for our state.

In the last three biennia, State Parks' General Fund allocation was decreased from \$94.5 million to the current level of \$8.7 million. Deep cuts to staffing and programs resulted, and the park system has fallen seriously behind in all aspects of operations. The 2015-17 budget request does not fix all the problems but does begin to reverse the decline and set State Parks on a course toward achieving the healthy and sustainable system of parks that the public wants and deserves.



Ranger and visitors at Deception Pass State Park.

The majority of the budget request is strategically focused on making visible, on-the-ground improvements in three areas:

- Park and facilities condition
- Direct customer services
- Stewardship of natural, cultural and historic resources

Park and facilities condition

Most park visitors go to state parks to picnic, stroll and hike in a beautiful—often spectacular—part of Washington. They expect their state parks to be in good condition with grounds, trails and structures that are well-maintained and functioning for their intended purpose. State parks, like small cities, have critical infrastructure such as roads and utility systems that must be constantly maintained.

Current condition: Deep reductions in personnel have resulted in an average of 3.5 full-time-equivalent staff (FTE) in every park to cover all shifts seven days a week. In the busy season, the 85 camping parks have visitors around the clock. Besides providing visitor services, staff have a wide variety of maintenance and administrative responsibilities to perform. Visitors are expressing concern about dirty restrooms, scruffy grounds, trails in need of maintenance and extended seasonal closures of popular areas in parks all over the state. The following are a few examples:



- Wallace Falls State Park, which receives 20,000 visitors in a typical July, has reduced restroom cleaning from twice a day to once daily.
- Lawn irrigation and weed control has been reduced or curtailed in most parks, and turf health is visibly declining. Trail maintenance has been drastically reduced or eliminated at many parks. At Lake Sammamish State Park, for example, hours for trail maintenance have decreased 75 percent.
- Besides the visible features in parks, the unseen infrastructure—electrical, water and sewer systems—is degrading due to lack of staff time to make timely maintenance and repairs.
- Satellite properties such as Squilchuck and Peshastin Pinnacles are closed more often than before, and extended seasonal closures are the current norm in many park areas, for example: Bowman Campground, North Beach and Rosario day-use areas at Deception Pass and the bathhouse and camp loop at Ike Kinswa State Park.

Visitors want and expect to interact with park rangers, staff and park helpers such as volunteer camp hosts. Reduced overall staffing in parks has resulted in less face-to-face contact with the public.

How the requested budget improves park and facilities condition:

The budget request adds approximately 115 new FTEs, including park aides and maintenance personnel, to parks across the state. This equates to approximately one additional FTE in every park to provide custodial and preventive maintenance and direct customer service, with the following outcomes:

- Parks remain open and accessible for day and overnight use
- Cleaner and better functioning restrooms and facilities
- Better maintained grounds, with lawns mowed and trails maintained for public use
- Critical infrastructure systems are better maintained and functioning. Includes electrical systems, water systems and sewer and wastewater systems

Direct public service

Visitors want and expect to interact with park rangers, staff and park helpers such as volunteer camp hosts. They want to be welcomed and have someone on hand to assist with registration and park information. Visitors love the interpretive and educational opportunities provided by knowledgeable park staff, including rangers and interpreters. These distinctive interactions are an important reason why people choose state parks.

Current condition: Reduced overall staffing in parks has resulted in less face-to-face contact with the visiting public. Many do not see park staff on their visit. Staff in some areas must oversee multiple parks or several widely dispersed areas within a park. Low staff capacity compromises the unique and iconic role of the ranger as park manager and law enforcement presence. Most interpretive programs—including ranger talks, campfire programs and school programs—have been eliminated.

- Welcome station hours in most parks have been reduced to a few hours a day; some parks have no welcome center presence two or more days a week in the busy season.



- At Deception Pass State Park, one of the largest, highest attendance parks in the system, there is often only one park ranger on duty in the evening to cover all areas of the park.
- At Cape Disappointment State Park, popular campfire programs have been reduced from seven nights a week to three in the busy season; Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center is closed two days a week; at Federation Forest, school outreach programs are no longer offered.
- Volunteer hours have been reduced from more than 300,000 hours a year to 229,000 hours in 2013, largely because of the lack of staff available to coordinate and oversee volunteer efforts.



State Parks mascot Eager Beaver and young campers at Lake Wenatchee.

How the requested budget improves direct public service:

The budget adds more than 45 new FTEs, including rangers and direct support personnel; FTEs devoted to on-the-ground interpretive and youth programs; and FTEs to promote partnerships and volunteers that add significant capacity to customer service in parks. These additions represent boots on the ground in welcome stations, providing a presence in campgrounds and day use areas and offering engaging natural, cultural and historical programs to the public. Outcomes include:

- Increased visitor satisfaction and more repeat visits
- Increased public and employee safety in parks
- Higher compliance rates for Discover Pass, boat moorage and other fee requirements
- Re-established ranger talks and interpretive programs in many parks
- Increased partnerships and volunteer hours to leverage resources and provide services

Care and stewardship

In addition to providing recreation opportunities for the public, State Parks has the responsibility to provide care and stewardship for significant natural features, such as Ice Age floods; archaeological treasures, such as ancient petroglyphs and pictographs; and historical places, such as homesteads, military forts and lighthouses. Our stewardship and management responsibilities include:

- 19,000 acres of wetlands
- 2.1 million lineal feet of riparian habitat
- 5,800 acres of significant habitat supporting rare plants, animals or both
- 4,800 acres of natural area preserves
- 13,000-plus acres of natural forest areas
- 19 heritage sites
- 700 historic buildings



Current status: Statewide staffing decreases in the parks means fewer “eyes” on park lands, resulting in increased timber theft, dumping and illegal activities that potentially put resources at risk.

State Parks faces the challenge of dealing with risk from hazard trees and tree diseases such as laminated root rot. State Parks also has significant challenges in preserving artifacts and the largest collection of publicly accessible historic buildings of any entity in the state. There are inadequate staffing and other resources to respond to essential responsibilities:

- The agency has one forestry specialist and two arbor crews with a total of four people to monitor and address risk tree and forest health issues on approximately 100,000 forested acres statewide.
- State parks has one stewardship staff person on each side of the mountains to address a broad array of habitat protection, noxious weed control and wildlife management responsibilities.
- One historic preservation specialist is responsible for monitoring and addressing issues for several historic districts and 700-plus historic buildings.

How the requested budget improves care and stewardship: The budget includes approximately nine FTEs to address on-the-ground stewardship needs. Three of these positions focus work specifically on tree risk and forest health issues, and three work on stewardship in key areas that have unmet needs: Spokane, Columbia River Gorge and Northern Puget Sound areas. Outcomes include:

- Improved forest health and the ability to address critical issues with tree disease and risk, such as laminated root rot.
- Increased preservation of pre-historic cultural resources such as archaeological sites.
- Greater capacity to preserve historic buildings, properties and artifacts.
- Reductions of invasive and exotic species that threaten and degrade native habitats.
- Completion of a natural resources inventory, which is essential for knowing the resources in our stewardship.

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